

Region of Waterloo
Public Health and Paramedic Services
Health Protection and Investigation

To: Community and Health Services Committee

Meeting Date: March 5, 2024

Report Title: 2023 Food Safety Program Report

1. Recommendation

For information.

2. Purpose / Issue:

This report provides a program update for Regional Council as the Board of Health on Public Health's Food Safety Program in 2023.

3. Strategic Plan:

This report aligns with Waterloo Region's 2023-2027 Strategic plan to provide Equitable Services and Opportunities. Public Health supports owners and operators of food premises in Waterloo Region to provide food safety services that are inclusive, accessible, and of the highest possible standard.

4. Report Highlights:

As required by the Ontario Public Health Standards, Region of Waterloo Public Health continues to deliver a Food Safety Program to prevent and reduce the burden of food-borne illness. Public Health routinely inspects food premises for compliance with provincial regulations, to facilitate business/regulatory agency licensing, and to investigate complaints. Food premises refer to places where food is manufactured, processed, prepared, stored, handled, displayed, distributed, transported, or sold, and are categorized into low risk (e.g., convenience stores), moderate risk (e.g., fast food restaurants, small grocery stores), and high risk (e.g., full menu restaurants, nursing homes).

- Highlights from the program's activities in 2023 include:
 - The number of food premises is trending upwards as Waterloo Region grows. In 2023, there were 3478 food premises representing a 17% increase over the past 10 years.
 - Public Health's capacity to conduct food safety inspections continues to

improve since the pandemic. With over 5887 inspections conducted in 2023, completion rates increased by 50% from 2022 with a focus on high-risk food premises. Appendix A provides a summary of all 2023 Food Safety program activities. Public Health utilizes a risk-based approach to prioritize inspections in order to both protect the public and support food premises operators to meet food safety standards.

- The local food service landscape continues to evolve since the pandemic with innovative business models and high industry staff turnover. This has resulted in more complex food safety inspections, a greater proportion of re-inspections required, and more time required for food service operator education and relationship building.

5. Background:

Public Health's Food Safety Program is delivered to meet the requirements in the Ministry of Health's [Ontario Public Health Standards](#), the associated Provincial [Food Safety Protocols](#), and [Ontario Food Premises Regulation 493/17](#), under the [Health Protection and Promotion Act](#). Public Health conducts risk-based routine inspections of food premises (high-risk premises require at least one inspection every four months; moderate-risk premises require at least one inspection every six months; and low-risk premises require at least one inspection annually). Other program activities include education for food handlers and consumers; and providing timely responses to requests for service (consumer complaints, special events, and recalls).

In 2023, Public Health conducted 4863 routine compliance inspections, 608 re-inspections, 182 initial assessments, and 234 demand inspections. Inspectors responded to 872 consumer complaints (over 65% filed through [Check it! We inspect it.](#)), assessed 362 special events, and enacted 35 enforcement actions (including 12 tickets, 1 summons, and 22 closure orders). The most common infractions were improper cleaning of equipment and utensils, and inadequate protection of food from contamination.

Public Health employs a progressive enforcement approach, working with operators to correct infractions through education and re-inspections. Enforcement tools, such as tickets and orders, are generally utilized when education fails to achieve compliance, or conditions present an immediate hazard to the public.

The [Ontario Food Premises Regulation 493/17](#) requires that at least one certified food handler be present at all times during operation of a food premises. Public Health partners with Conestoga College to deliver a Food Safety Training Certification program with 750 food handlers certified in 2023.

Food safety inspections can be complex and challenging work. While completion rates are increasing, Public Health has had to absorb ongoing, additional provincial

requirements within a set provincial budget. Inspectors must therefore prioritize food safety work based on an assessment of risk, with significant focus on education, equity and strengthening relationships.

6. Communication and Engagement with Area Municipalities and the Public

Area Municipalities:

Public Health collaborates with Area Municipalities to provide business licensing approvals for food premises, and to respond to complaints when needed.

Public:

Food safety information is shared with the public through the Public Health [Food Safety Webpage](#), social media (@ROWPublicHealth), and Regional publications (e.g., Around the Region). The [Check it! We inspect it.](#) website is also available for community members to file complaints about businesses and to check inspection results which allows them make an informed decision about the facilities they use.

To better connect with equity-deserving groups in the community, Public Health has begun sharing food safety information with newcomer groups (e.g., In Her Shoes, the Canadian Arab Women's Association, residents of a non-profit housing cooperative) and will continue to expand in this area. Topics covered include guidance for opening a food business, as well as general food safety practices to prevent food-borne illness.

7. Financial Implications:

Food safety activities are funded within the Department's base budget for Public Health Mandatory Programs; the budget is approved annually by Regional Council (as the Board of Health). The cost shared Mandatory programs are funded up to 70% by the Province with the remainder funded by the local tax levy.

8. Conclusion / Next Steps:

Public Health is committed to provide an impactful Food Safety Program in our rapidly growing region with an increasingly complex food service landscape, through inspections, education, and enforcement. Public Health will continue to employ a risk-based approach to prioritize inspections, and support owners and operators to maintain best practices that mitigate the risk of food-borne illness.

9. Attachments:

Appendix A: Summary of 2023 Food Safety Program Activities

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